EXPLORING THE REPORTERS SANS FRONTIÈRES PLATFORM - USING QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY TO STUDY ALTERNATIVE JOURNALISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT: Alternative journalism is usually associated with political engagement or activism, but it also covers a range of other issues such as minorities, ethnic groups, cultural and social actions, usually run by non-professionals. However, there are several examples of journalists working professionally on the political and investigative aspects of this type of journalism, such as the organisation Reporters Sans Frontières.

Technological innovation - especially since the expansion of Internet 2.0 and the creation of social networks - has been a fertile field for the expansion of alternative journalism.

This is an exploratory study on the content of alternative journalism on online platforms. The aim is to understand the main issues addressed by alternative journalism organisations in the digital arena and, in particular, to learn more about the digital presence of Reporters Sans Frontières. The work is anchored in qualitative methodology, in particular in content analysis. The data has been retrieved from the The data has been retrieved from the Internet *corpus latente*. After listing the more visible platforms, we have created categories to understand the type of platform to which each one belongs: politics, culture, arts, etc. We also listed the headlines of all RSF news in French, English, Portuguese and Spanish between January and April 2019.

We were able to conclude that alternative journalism is generally developing in a professional way. Alternative journalists are using new online platforms to achieve greater visibility and impact.

Using qualitative analysis techniques, we were able to conclude that, in terms of content, the majority is of a political nature. And we were able to conclude that RSF, through its significant worldwide network, publishes hundreds of news items focusing on sensitive political issues.

KEYWORDS: Alternative Journalism, Digital Age, Qualitative Methodology, Reporters Sans Frontières.

INTRODUCTION

In a broad approach, it is accepted that alternative journalism may be as old as classical journalism. Alternative journalism is generally associated with political engagement or activism, but it can also be dedicated to a range of other issues such as minorities, ethnic groups, cultural and social actions promoted by non-professionals. On the other hand, there are several cases where journalists work professionally in the political and investigative aspects of this type of journalism. We believe that it is considered important to explore these issues at an academic level, especially from the perspective of the impact of new digital technologies on alternative journalism in the context of Internet 2.0.

Certainly, social networks have created the basis for a wider dissemination of alternative journalism. However, in this paper, in addition to a study of the main issues addressed by alternative journalism, we aim to understand the work developed today by an organisation founded several decades ago (based on its presence in the digital world and the main themes published).

The work has been divided into 6 chapters. In the following chapter - the second - we present a theoretical framework of alternative journalism and media in the digital age. The third chapter is dedicated to the methodology, focusing on the qualitative analysis methodology, with the aim of justifying the choice of this methodology based on the perspective of several specialists. The chapter ends with a description of the research process. The fourth chapter deals with the data collection and analysis techniques, also based on the vision of several authors. The fifth chapter presents the data collected and the results. In the sixth chapter we present some final considerations.

We believe that our study contributes to a better understanding of the main issues of alternative journalism, based on real data, as well as to the digital visibility of the work of Reporters Sans Frontières journalists.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Today's global society is structured according to the dynamics and domain of different powers (political, economic, competitive and others) and is increasingly focused on media coverage [1]. This media coverage refers to the so-called social communication media or mass media such as radio, television and newspapers, being a "special type of communication" [2], which involves "different operating conditions among which are the nature of the audience and the communicator's communicative experience" as defended by Wright (1978) quoted by Kunsch (2003) [3], with the addition of the Internet and, in particular, social networks. Alternative journalism is included in the above-mentioned "special type of communication".

Journalism has "several legitimate aspects that contribute in different ways to the functioning of democracy" as James Curran writes in the preface to his Alternative Media

Handbook [4]. These aspects include the interpretive and subjective styles of journalism found in most of what are considered alternative media; forms of media that, for Curran, allow diverse social groups to define and constitute themselves, facilitate internal strategic debate, and promote the transmission of their concerns and opinions to a wider audience [4].

These authors are just some of those who have contributed to the gradual growth of "academic interest in alternative journalism" [5]. Studies on alternative journalism have shown, among other aspects, that:

> "Alternative journalism comes from dissatisfaction not only with the main coverage of certain subjects and topics, but also with the epistemology of the news. This critique is defined as *inter alia*, that is, anchored in news source conventions and representation; the inverted pyramid of news texts; the hierarchical and capitalized economy of commercial journalism; the professional, the elite base of journalism as a practice; the professional norm of objectivity; and the subordinate role of the public as receiver" [6].

Dissatisfaction, as Denis McQuail defines is an "expression of celebration in completely different ways, free from established systems". This author proposed the concept of the media as "democratic participant", a way of explaining or at least labeling the "many ideas in favor of alternative media grassroots that express and care for the needs of citizens" [7].

In the beginning, alternative media were not accessible to the general public, but with the development of technology, information capacity, storage and data transmission, there has been a large number of content creators and followers, as new technology allows small communities to express their problems, concepts, opinions and make themselves known far beyond their geographical and cultural boundaries.

Now the analysis of the information contained in digital media in the context of the use of different media "allows to see their place in the context of the combination of media for different purposes, being accepted that digital media, also called 'new' media, do not simply replace the previous ones - 'traditional' or 'old'-, but recombines them" [8].

The use of platforms in alternative journalism (similar to collaborative journalism) is a modality and integration of a potentially disruptive or innovative technology, based on the 3Ts model [9]:

- Transfer - which corresponds to the mere transfer of conventional approaches to a work environment with technology;

- Transform - which involves redefining conventional approaches to technology--based work environments;

- Transcend - which manages to break up with conventional approaches, allowing new paradigms to emerge.

METHODOLOGY

In general terms, scientific research consists of an investigation that: a) seeks answers to a question; b) systematically uses a predefined set of procedures to answer the question; c) collects evidence; d) produces findings that are not predetermined; e) produces findings that are applicable beyond the immediate limits of the study. Qualitative research has these characteristics [10].

Qualitative methodology is understood as "a means of exploring and understanding the meaning that individuals or groups attach to a social and human problem" [11]. The main characteristics of qualitative methods in the analysis of human behaviour from the actor's perspective are naturalistic observation, subjectivity, discovery and process orientation, exploratory, descriptive and inductive character, and non-generalisation of results [12]. The word qualitative implies the highlighting of the qualities of entities, processes and meanings; a qualitative study emphasises the socially constructed quality of reality, taking into account a constructivist framework, the closest relationship between the researcher and the object of study, and the situational constraints that shape the investigation [13].

Qualitative methods are used to answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the participant's point of view. The data obtained is generally not countable or measurable. Qualitative research techniques include analysing texts and documents, such as government reports, media articles, websites or journals, to learn about private or public matters [14]. It also seeks to understand a particular problem or research topic from the perspective of the stakeholders themselves. Qualitative research is particularly effective in providing culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviours and social contexts of particular populations. [10].

Moreover, qualitative methods are no longer seen as useful simply because they allow us to deal with data that are not considered suitable for statistical analysis. The methodology of qualitative analysis is increasingly recognised and is now considered by many professionals to be a legitimate way of obtaining information and understanding human behaviour. Although qualitative research has long been 'out of fashion', the modern interest in it represents a revival of an approach that has as much history in the social sciences as quantitative methods. [15].

With regard to the criteria for applying qualitative analysis, the main ones are defined by Guba & Lincoln (1994), [16] quoted in the Qualitative Research in Education Handbook [17]:

- Historical contextualisation of the situation studied (taking into account socio-economic, cultural, gender background);

- The extent to which the study focuses on the eradication of ignorance (unmasking of prejudices);

- The extent to which it provides a stimulus for action, i.e. for existing change.

Based on the coordinates of the quoted authors, we understood that the qualitative methodology was the most appropriate, especially due to the exploratory nature of this research.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES

The purpose of data analysis "is to organise, structure and extract meaning from the content. Transcripts need to be read and reread, then organised, synthesised and interpreted, and the final task is to reduce the data for reporting purposes [18]. Therefore, according to the author, it is possible to state that qualitative analysis is a research process, interpretation, reduction and ordering of data to achieve the description or explanation of a phenomenon [18]. Data analysis is defined by Morse as:

> "a process that requires intelligent questioning, a continual search for answers, active observation and accurate memory. It is a process of joining and joining data, making the invisible obvious, distinguishing the signifier from the insignificant, linking seemingly unrelated data, fitting categories into each other and attributing consequences to antecedents… It is a process of conjecture and verification, correction and modification, suggestion and defense. It is a process of organizing so that the analytical scheme appears obvious" [19].

In terms of analysis techniques, content analysis was chosen. The content analysis technique is characterised by the search for explanation and understanding, allowing conclusions to be drawn that identify, in a systematic and objective way, the singular and implicit characteristics of the discourse, as it seeks to know what is behind the words, in search of other realities. [20]. Therefore, inferences are made about what may influence the nature of the interpretation, based on establishing a relationship between the data obtained [21].

The purpose of content analysis is to "quantify salient and overt features of large numbers of texts, and statistics are used to make broad inferences about representational processes and policies" [22].

In short, as Castro argues, for research to be scientific, a threshold of control over observational methods needs to be established [23] which, according to the author, means the use of systematic and structured methods of observation and evaluation. Based on these foundations, this study is essentially an exploratory empirical research that attempts to present an integral vision and a general holistic understanding.

In practical terms, we began by collecting the names of organizations with greater visibility in the internet in Portuguese (selecting only publications of Portuguese origin) and in English. Then, a categorization or "coding" [24] was carried out in order to understand the typologies associated with alternative journalism: politics, culture, art, etc.; bearing in mind that

"Coding is one of the most difficult processes in content analysis (…) since a large part is closely linked to the richness of the discourse. It is possible to think of the codification process as a space for induction and deduction (…); the categories deduced from the literature review allow the creation of an analysis framework" [25].

The second step involved collecting, organising and coding data on the news content of the Reporters Without Borders platform. Data was also retrieved from the corpus lata, and then a content analysis of the collected data was carried out (without the use of content analysis software).

RESULTS

The Internet search made it possible to identify Portuguese and international online publications that could be described as alternative journalism. The following table (Table 1) presents a list of the organisations identified, based on their greater 'visibility'.:

#	Alternative Journalism	Name	Type	Source
1	Portugal	Fumaça	**Política**	https://fumaca.pt/
2	Portugal	Divergente	**Política/Investigação**	https://fumaca.pt/
3	Portugal	QINews	**Política**	https://qinews.pt/
4	Portugal	O Corvo	**Política**	https://ocorvo.pt/
5	Portugal	Arte/Factos	**Arte e Cultura**	http://www.arte-factos.net/
6	Portugal	Praxis	**Política**	https://praxismagazine.org/
7	Portugal	Jornalismo de Causas	**Política**	https://jornalismodecausas.wordpress.com/
8	Portugal	Vice	**Política**	https://www.vice.com/pt
9	Portugal	Comunidade Cultura e Arte	**Arte e Cultura**	https://www.comunidadeculturaearte.com/
10	Portugal	Mapa	**Política**	http://www.jornalmapa.pt/
1	International	Media Partners	**Política**	https://euroalter.com/media-partners
2	International	RSF - Reporters Sans Frontières	**Política**	https://rsf.org/pt
3	International	ICIJ: International Consortium of Investigative Journalists	**Política/Investigação**	https://www.icij.org/
4	International	The Corbett Report	**Política/Investigação**	https://www.corbettreport.com/
5	International	Moon of Alabama	**Política/Economia**	https://www.moonofalabama.org/
6	International	The Anti Media	**Política**	https://theantimedia.com/
7	International	Global Research/Mondialisation	**Política**	https://www.globalresearch.ca/about-2
8	International	We are a change	**Política/Ativismo**	https://www.youtube.com/user/wearechange
9	International	The Rubin Report	**Política/Sociedade**	https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJdKr0Bgd_5saZYqLCa9mng
10	International	Consortium News	**Política/Investigação**	https://consortiumnews.com/
11	International	Truth In Media	**Política**	http://truthinmedia.com/
12	International	Media Roots	**Política**	http://mediaroots.org/
13	International	Propublica	**Política**	https://www.propublica.org/
14	International	Periodismo alternativo	**Política**	https://periodismo--alternativo.com/
15	International	Off Guardian	**Política**	https://off-guardian.org/
16	International	21st Century Wire	**Política**	https://21stcenturywire.com/

Table 1. List of the organizations with more visibility in the internet

Source: *Corpus Latente*

Table 1 identifies 10 national and 16 international alternative news organisations. The data show that in Portugal, 8 of the 10 selected organisations focus on political issues, while the other 2 are related to arts and culture. At the international level, the work of all 16 organisations listed is related to politics; of these, 3 organisations combine politics with investigative journalism, 1 focuses on politics and the economy and another on politics and society.

From the point of view of the use of the so-called digital world, it's important to note the presence of these organisations/publications in the various social networks (that can be accessed from websites or platforms). It was also possible to verify that some of the organisations listed have, for example, their own YouTube channel.

As far as the RSF platform is concerned, in addition to learning about the themes of the news published, we wanted to observe the transition and visibility of this organisation (which has been in existence for several decades) in the digital world.

RSF is an international organisation with consultative status at the United Nations (UN), UNESCO, the Council of Europe (CoE) and the International Organisation of the Francophonie (IOF). RSF is an independent organisation based in Paris, with daily and multilingual publications in French, English, Spanish, Arabic and Persian, and often in other languages (Chinese, Portuguese, Russian, etc.), as well as reports and press releases on the situation of freedom of information in the world and the attacks on it. RSF's communication campaigns go around the world, not only because of its digital visibility, but also because the organisation itself is present in 130 countries through a vast network of correspondents. Interventions in the international press raise public awareness and influence political leaders on specific cases or overarching issues. RSF works to defend freedom of expression and to protect the freedom and lives of reporters in difficult situations, such as war zones.

By comparing the headlines in different languages, we also concluded that on the one hand, journalists are not limited to translating the content, as there is specific news for the audience in each language. On the other hand, the analysis of the content of the topics published between January and April in the different languages allows us to deduce a great amplitude in terms of the scope of their communication and to confirm the political aspect of the topics dealt with.

Finally, we observed the content of the platform itself. This process allowed us to conclude that his organisation communicates in six languages and that its presence on all social networks is of enormous importance and could be one of the factors that contribute to having an effective (and influential) voice at a global level and that RSF maximises it through the use of digital media.

As mentioned above, we listed all the headlines of the news published on the RSF platform between January and March 2019 and divided them by language (French, English, Spanish and Portuguese), as summarised in Table 2:

Language	Total
French	200
English	215
Spanish	62
Portuguese	11

Table 2. Quantity of news (headlines) from January to Mach, 2019

In terms of its business model, it was possible to conclude that, in addition to a certain degree of self-sufficiency generated by its online shop, it relies on the support of donors (whose identities are listed on the platform) as well as public funding for around 50% of its total budget.

RSF also produces an annual publication, the Press Freedom Index, and maintains an online barometer that tracks the number of victims of repression of freedom of expression. According to RSF, this ranking or index, which assesses the situation of journalism in 180 countries and territories every year, reveals the triggering of a mechanism of fear that is very harmful to the serene exercise of journalism.

Hostility towards journalists, and even hatred expressed by political leaders in many countries, has led (in 2018) to more serious and frequent acts of violence, increasing the risks and generating unprecedented levels of fear in certain countries and places. The index shows that out of 180 countries, press freedom is considered good in only 24.

The Press Freedom Index therefore demonstrates not only the political aspect that has been highlighted, but also the pertinence of the issues raised and the need for an active voice to defend the work of these professionals and citizens.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study has allowed us to verify that alternative journalism is very active and has a strong presence in the so-called digital world, and through this presence achieves a global reach among its audiences.

The existence of several organisations dedicated to alternative journalism brings together "ordinary people as a set of voices with an equal right (to be heard) with elite groups" [6]. This right to be heard and to have access to spaces where they can engage in dialogue with others is seen, among other things, as crucial for people to be active citizens.

Nevertheless, through the chosen example of the RSF platform, we have been able to demonstrate that alternative journalism is not only developed by individuals, but also carried out by a large number of professionals who "promote the transmission of their concerns and views to a wider audience" [4], And the use of new technologies allows them to achieve greater visibility and impact. In this sense, we have been able to show that there

are larger organisations dedicated to alternative journalism, which are also supported by a large number of donors and, interestingly, in the case of RSF, by public funding.

The work of these organisations, especially that of RSF, is internationally recognised through various awards (including representation at the United Nations), which allows us to conclude that RSF has achieved a high level of professionalism and influence over time, and that its visibility is considered to be greater in the digital age.

With regard to digital technology, it was concluded that, in the context of alternative journalism, the RSF platform represents a modality and integration of a potentially disruptive or innovative technology, based on the 3Ts model [9] which was described using the concepts of transference, transformation and transcendence.

Finally, it is important to stress that the continued existence of some forms of alternative journalism and the expansion of social spaces for dialogue and participation remain essential for the healthy functioning of society, as evidenced by the results of the "Press Freedom Index", where only 24 of the 180 countries in the world are considered "good", i.e. as having favourable conditions for free journalistic expression.

As for the qualitative methodology option, content analysis allowed us to achieve the main objectives of this study. In terms of content, after codification, it was concluded that it is markedly political, both in the digital sites of alternative journalism and in the RSF platform.

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